SWIMMING MERIT BADGE

NOTE TO COUNSELOR

🛡️ SAFETY NOTE

Safety is the first priority in every Swimming merit badge activity. All swimming, diving, rescue, and survival-skill work must be conducted according to Scouting America's Safe Swim Defense standards, under the supervision of a counselor who is currently trained in Safe Swim Defense and, ideally, certified as an aquatics instructor or lifeguard through the American Red Cross or YMCA. Every session in the water requires qualified supervision, a lookout, and response personnel who can act immediately if a Scout needs help.

Before starting any in-water activity:

- Review the eight points of Safe Swim Defense with all Scouts: qualified supervision, personal health review, safe area, response personnel/lifeguards, lookout, ability groups, buddy system, and discipline.
- Confirm every Scout has a current personal health review on file and disclose any recent illness, injury, or medical condition before entering the water.
- Inspect the swim area for depth, clarity, temperature, currents, and hazards; murky water where a swimmer's feet cannot be seen while treading water is not permitted.
- Sort Scouts into swimmer, beginner, and nonswimmer ability groups, and keep each group within its designated area.
- Pair every Scout with a buddy for the duration of the activity and use a buddy check at regular intervals.
- Have a dedicated lookout watching the water at all times, separate from the lifeguard or response personnel.
- Stop the activity immediately if an unsafe condition, storm, or lightning risk develops.
- Have a first aid kit and emergency action plan ready before Scouts enter the water.
- Follow Scouting America's Safe Swim Defense and Safety Afloat guidance, facility rules, and applicable state and local codes.

Rescue and survival skills deserve special attention. Reaching and throwing rescues must always be attempted before a swimming rescue, and a rescue swimmer should avoid direct contact with a panicking victim whenever possible. Line-rescue, survival-floating, and HELP/huddle-position skills should be practiced only in water and depths appropriate to the Scout's ability, with a helper and response personnel standing by. Diving requirements must be done only in water of the required minimum depth, following facility diving rules.

🏊 COUNSELOR NOTE

Purpose:
Swimming is designed to help Scouts become safer, more capable, and more confident in

and around the water while building the stroke technique, endurance, and rescue and survival skills that support a lifetime of aquatic activity. The badge also lays the foundation for advanced water activities such as the Lifesaving and Water Sports merit badges.

Swimming works particularly well as a **learn–demonstrate–practice–apply** merit badge. Whenever possible, let the Scout perform the stroke, rescue, or survival skill rather than simply watching it demonstrated. A currently trained lifeguard or aquatics instructor should supervise all in-water work.

Teaching Tips

- **Start with the swimmer test.** Confirm each Scout can pass the BSA swimmer test before moving into stroke work, rescue skills, or diving requirements.
- **Teach correct form before distance.** Have Scouts learn proper body position, kick, arm mechanics, and breathing for each stroke before swimming for time or distance.
- **Ask, don't just tell.** Ask questions such as: Why is a reaching or throwing rescue safer than a swimming rescue? Why does ability grouping prevent drownings?
- **Let Scouts do the work.** Counselors and lifeguards should supervise and coach without performing the skill for the Scout.
- **Practice rescue skills realistically but safely.** Use a cooperative practice victim and a helper for line rescues, and keep the water within the Scout's demonstrated ability.
- **Connect strokes to endurance.** Explain how pacing and stroke choice affect the 150-yard continuous swim, and encourage Scouts to save an easier stroke for the longer leg.
- **Teach the reasoning, not just the list.** Encourage Scouts to explain why each Safe Swim Defense point and each health-concern treatment matters, not simply recite it.
- **Use small-group rotations when appropriate.** Rotate Scouts through stations for strokes, rescue skills, and survival skills so each Scout gets individual coaching.
- **Use reputable instructional resources.** Video demonstrations of stroke technique and rescue skills can supplement in-person coaching for skills not fully covered in a single session.

Key Points to Reinforce

- Safety comes before completing any requirement.
- Reach or throw before you go: a swimming rescue is the last resort, not the first.
- Good stroke form matters more than speed.
- A Scout should recognize personal limits and know when to stop or ask for help.
- The buddy system and ability groups exist because drownings happen quickly and quietly.
- Cold water, fatigue, and panic all increase risk faster than Scouts expect.
- Swimming skill supports lifelong fitness as well as water safety.
- Different pools, lakes, and rivers present different hazards; the Scout should understand the concepts behind Safe Swim Defense, not just a single location's rules.

Organizing the Badge

The current requirements move Scouts through the following skill areas in order:

☐ Safe Swim Defense knowledge and health-concern prevention/treatment discussion

☐ BSA swimmer test (prerequisite for the skills below)

☐ Stroke technique: front crawl or trudgen, back crawl, sidestroke, breaststroke, elementary backstroke

☐ 150-yard continuous swim using all five strokes

☐ Water rescue skills: reaching, throwing, and line rescue as tender and rescuer

☐ Survival skills: resting float, survival floating, and HELP/huddle positions with a life jacket

☐ Surface diving and underwater swimming in water not exceeding 10 feet

☐ Diving entries: standing headfirst dive and long shallow dive in water at least 7 feet deep

☐ Health benefits of aerobic exercise and swimming as fitness and therapeutic activity

Each area builds on the one before it, so counselors should confirm the swimmer test and Safe Swim Defense discussion are complete before moving into strokes, rescue, and survival skills.

Helpful Resources

Current **Swimming Merit Badge pamphlet**

Current **Swimming Merit Badge requirements**

Current **Scouting America Safe Swim Defense and Safety Afloat guidance**

American Red Cross or YMCA aquatics/lifeguard instructor materials

Facility-specific pool or waterfront safety rules

Currently trained lifeguards or aquatics instructors for skill verification

Reputable instructional videos on stroke technique and water rescue

Related Scouting merit badges—including Lifesaving, Water Sports, Snow Sports, Kayaking, Canoeing, and Rowing—offer additional resources and natural next steps after Swimming.

Counselor Reminder

The goal is not to turn every Scout into a competitive swimmer. The goal is to help Scouts become safe, confident, and capable in the water—able to swim well, help someone in trouble the right way, and know when and how to get qualified help.